“A KNOCKOUT”

A Short Story

by

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A KNOCKOUT

Leo had been boxing for three years. It was a club at the old YMCA, and the room itself, up on the fifth floor, was small and cramped and had seen many days. Its floor was of varnished wooden planks the color of molasses, and there was knotty pine paneling up the walls. A speed bag was mounted in one corner, a sit-up board was tilted in another, and opposite to that was a heavy bag. It hung inside a canvas skirt that was streaked and stained like old tarpaulin. The near wall had a few mirrors and enough room for a couple of guys to do shadow boxing. The ring itself took up the whole middle of the room. It was an old ring with a set of wooden steps painted red at one side and an antique-looking brass bell. Some Indian clubs were in a row near the door when you came in. The place seemed to be frozen in time perhaps around the year 1920.

Leo's name was actually Joe, but because his last name was Leonardi and because he had developed a reputation as a tough fighter, and in fact an undefeated one, everyone started calling him "Leo the lion," which after a time got shortened to simply Leo. When you hear me say that he was known to be tough, you are likely to imagine that he was a troublemaker of some kind. Actually, he was never that. He was quiet and modest, and though he was not brilliant, within his limits he was thoughtful – within his limits and perhaps a bit beyond. This is more than can be said of most people. At this time, he was 17 years old and he had been competing at 153 lbs. for about a year. He had extremely broad shoulders, though his arms themselves were not thick, rather he had thick legs, full calves and a backside so well-muscled that it looked like he had cantaloupes in his trunks. His chin was squared off and his nose was a perfect number seven upside down. He did in fact look like something Michealangelo might have carved, and he had thick dark brown hair that was trimmed short and yet

still curly. Girls fell over dead for him, and yet between school, which he neglected, unfortunately, and work, as a part-time cleaner in an office building, where he was meticulous, and training, about which he was obsessive, he didn't have anything left over.

At the time that I am talking about, things were somewhat different than they are now. Although there was still racial prejudice and various ethnic disputes, these things did not receive as much attention as they do these days. Perhaps it was the place – the old town, unenlightened cow pasture freezing in the northern winds on the borderline with Canada, where people had quite enough to do just to keep going. And perhaps that was part of it – there were French programs for children on one of the television channels, and, in the town itself, names that were French and Italian, Greek names and Ukrainian names, many Irish names and the usual WASPs, along with a fair scattering of that most despised group of all, the indiscriminate "white trash," as they are often called, ugly term enough and in fact one that was seldom heard, nor likewise "pollock," "wop," or any of the others, for then, in that place, with so little to recommend it, in that place and in that time, these people flowed together like streams of water in the same sponge.

And yet of course there was one girl in particular. Her name was Julie Siemens and she had hair that was gold and honey mixed. She had high cheekbones that made you think of a Bulgarian princess, shining wicked eyes in which there was way too much intelligence – and they were blue, very blue – full breasts, a narrow waist not exactly like a wasp but almost, and an ass even more beautiful than Leo's.

Leo's friends all knew that she was the only girl he ever really noticed or at least that she was the only one he ever talked about, in his quiet and laconic way. And yet he was not shy. He would have asked her out, but in considering the whole issue in the most realistic way and being perfectly candid with himself he knew that they were not right for each other. She was beautiful, she was fascinating, she was alluring and provocative but she

was not for him. And the reason was that she was just a bit too smart. Interestingly, both of them knew this and it created a sort of truce between them. But smart in what way exactly? Of course, she was a straight A student, but that was easy enough. Leo was not, but that really was not the problem.

There was another problem with Julie Siemens, which was her reputation, as it was called. It was said that she was like a phone booth or like the turnstile to get into the movie theatre. But let us not engage in gossip. She was a nice girl certainly, but she was very willful. Her mother told her this, and her sister told her that, and her father never told her anything but merely thought about various things silently. And because they were a rather civilized family, there was no yelling and screaming at their house, as there might have been at Leo's, and as there had been at various times, though with regard to his schoolwork. Indeed, it was his family who felt embarrassed at his grades – his mother and his uncle – not merely displeased or disappointed but actually embarrassed. They knew that he was thought to be not absolutely brilliant, and they did not like this. "You're going to have us look like dumb wops or something, Leo," his uncle said, in his quick, forceful, humorous way. His uncle was a physics teacher at the community college. They wanted to prevail upon him to fix this piece of negative publicity, but Leo could not seem to understand that in the world it was not like in the ring. In the world appearances were everything and substance was nothing.

One day Leo's friend Maize – this was what he was called, some of his teeth were stained and one was missing – told him that he needed a favor. Maize was short and skinny. His chest was sunken, his skin was pale, and his eyes were magnified behind thick glasses, glasses that were like whole aquarium tanks in which his eyes swam like oysters. And then there was the issue of his teeth. But for Maize himself there was no issue except money. He had developed ways and means. His mother was divorced, which was unusual at that time, and she worked in some capacity for the phone

company. She also received visits from different men and from his father too sometimes. Maize seemed not to be bothered by any of this. He had found a way to increase both his bank account and his prestige. I was going to say an easy way, but no ways are easy, if they are ways. So few years, and already so much misery; so few years and already so much failure, frustrated striving, loneliness, grief. In dark rooms exchanges are made, and one exits by a different door than one came in.

“Don’t you know what that nigger son of a bitch is doing?” Maize was explaining. “No, what’s he doing?” Leo said. They were on the bridge crossing over the river. It was one of those old concrete bridges that are like whole buildings. The top level, where they were, was a vaulting arch and the bottom level under them was the thing that was vaulted over, a road that twisted beneath a grimy cathedral of cement – massive, filthy, its huge columns reaching high above, visited only by pigeons and the occasional seagull. A hundred feet below that, the ferocious Black River spun past, crazed, and wildly polluted.

It was October now. Time was passing. Even when you are young, time is passing. It was seven in the evening and he had just gotten out of work. Maize knew his schedule and ambushed him when he came out of the building and walked along beside him. He was wearing all black these days, it was his black phase – black jeans, black shirt, black shoes, black corduroy jacket. He looked like he had been dipped in ink, except for his hands and face which were root pale. The cigarette hung from his lip like a loose nail from a board. “You know what I’m saying?” He pulled the cigarette from his face like someone blowing a big kiss. The wind hit them on the crest of the bridge. “Meenkye…” Maize said. The sky was black and deep blue both at once, black straight above and blue at the horizon. The sun was almost done with its fatal hemorrhage. The clouds were wash rags wiped across the night’s glass. Although Leo was tired, he yet was not tired. He was never tired, unless he was worn out by his own clenched-in seriousness. The stars were white sand grains blown far ahead into the other world. He wanted to

chase after them and sweep them into his duffle bag. He wanted to chase after them and sweep them under his arms and in between his legs.

“I thought you liked her,” Maize shouted up.

“I do.”

“Well then?”

“What am I supposed to do about it, Maizy?” He was hauling himself and his duffel bag into the wind, which blasted him and made him turn his face down.

“See the way he was doing with her?”

“Big deal.”

“Everybody saw that. Right in the middle of the dance floor.”

It was true. There was, at the other high school, the rival, a young man by the name of Skipper Smith. Skipper Smith was every fond mother’s ideal of a nice young Black man. He was like certain Black men that one heard about, polished and subdued and dignified. They were like pieces of fine furniture or expensive musical instruments, pianos let’s say or cellos. Skipper Smith was like one of these. On top of that, he was an athlete, not big but beautifully coordinated, quick rather than fast, poised and intelligent. His body was intelligence itself, but his mind was also, and he was well-spoken and courteous. Skipper Smith was Julie’s new boyfriend, and it seemed as though, to those interested, that she might stick with this one for a while. This was judged both with regard to duration thus far, but also with regard to intensity: there had been little indiscretions here and there. The one that exercised Maize right now had happened a few weeks before at a high school dance, when the two of them had danced slowly in the middle of the room.

“You go to him,” Maize demanded.

“No.”

“Yes yes.”

“What are you the KKK?”

“Fucking A, man. The bastards go to pay pay.”

“No no no.”

“Yes,” Maize punched the air.

“Why, what did he do to you?”

“He owes me money.”

“Bull.”

“Yes, he does. No lie.”

“From what?”

“What do you think?”

“He doesn’t do that stuff.”

“That’s what you say.”

“It’s what I know.”

“No you don’t. What, are you like her? – a nigger lover?”

“There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“You know what they say about those black guys.”

“Fuck this.”

“He’s probably nozzlin that right in her.”

“Your heads a nozzle.”

“Are you going to do this for me or not?”

“No.”

“Just give him a few good cuffs, bam bam.” He illustrated on the air in front of him, his face turned sideways like a swimmer gulping air. Then he kissed his cigarette good by again and belched smoke. Then he stopped and faced Leo, playing air guitar “I’m a voodoo chile,” he shouted and he gave an obscene little shimmy.

“You think Hendrix is a nigger too,” Leo asked.

“Absolutely. And Sly and the Family Stone too, fuck ‘em. Give you 500 to knock him around for me.”

“I’m going to knock you around.”

“This can be the start of something, I’m serious. You and me.”

“Right.”

“Help your mother out. How much you make at that place pushing a mop around? And you think you’re going to be the heavyweight champ? I don’t think so.”

“I’m a welterweight. Maybe middle after a while.”

“No man. It’s not going to happen. You’re good but that’s – ”

“Fuck you, Maize. What you gotta give me this for?”

“And who’s she seeing now? Since your old man died.”

“Shut up, Maize.”

This was quite true also. Maize unfortunately knew what he was talking about. Do not such people always know, in their own way and according to their lights and in relation to their own purposes? Leo’s father died when he was seven, of a strange infection of the shoulder, bursitis, that had become unexpectedly an overwhelming fever. For two weeks he lay in the hospital, only a sheet over his lower parts, naked otherwise, delirious or in fact unconscious, his fever reaching 105 and staying there. The doctors used up every unit of penicillin that they had and then they had to send by special courier to Syracuse for more, and that was used, but he died anyway. Leo remembered only certain things about him and his illness not at all. The funeral he remembered vaguely. And then eventually his mother began to receive calls from other men. They were shy, polite, reserved, awkward; he was shy, polite, reserved, awkward with them, not hostile, puzzled rather by the whole thing. Sometimes he found himself thinking that his father would come home again one day. This was when he was a boy. He no longer thought that now, but he was both pleased and displeased that his mother never remarried. The pleased part he kept in a special pantry in his mind, only the displeased part did he admit. His mother was a cook at a restaurant. She was an excellent cook. But that’s what she was, a cook. She worked hard, which she did enjoy. She loved cooking. And yet still he knew that she got tired, and he also knew that as she got older the tiredness got worse.

“Five hundred and that’s it. I won’t bother you with it anymore.”

Leo looked at him. “All right,” Leo heard himself say. “All right. Five hundred.”

Maize was genuinely surprised at first, astonished. And then he was overjoyed. He pounded Leo on the shoulder. “Way to go, man, way to go. I knew you’d come through for me.”

“All right. So what we do is….”

What they did was: at the next dance the plan was to ambush Skipper Smith on his way to pick up his date. Leo would wait in an alley near where the dance was scheduled to be held. He would draw him back in there with some kind of story – he and Skipper knew each other well enough, and trusted each other, and Skipper was an open, candid, unsuspecting sort of person and thoroughly middle class. His father was an engineer and his mother was a school nurse. When Leo thought of it, he tried to think of some reason to dislike Skipper, but he couldn’t. He was a good guy. When he thought of the money, he thought of all things that he could do with it – new shoes for her, she always said her feet hurt, a couple dresses, put a bunch away in savings for her…then he thought of what he might get for himself, but he couldn’t really think of anything. Then he remembered the old gray sweatshirt he had, his favorite. Yes, he might get a couple more of them. But at the same time a different thought crossed his mind. He recalled Maize’s odd proposition: “You and me,” he had said. Leo thought just briefly, but in a kind of dizzy way, of an on-going stream of money, five hundred each time. And when he thought of this, all sorts of new spaces in his mind opened up with a feeling that was like clouds moving aside.

About a week later he was walking around downtown when he ran into Skipper Smith just by chance. When Skipper saw him, he raised his eyebrows, which was his way of smiling, and because of how the pedestrian traffic was they just seemed to float into each other’s space. Yes, there was Skipper – an open friendly face, broad shoulders, a creamy looking black leather jacket, a fitted green shirt, the smooth effortless manor that bespoke not only natural friendliness but also intelligence, natural physical grace,

and skill that came without effort, and then finally, also, money. Julie came up on his shoulder as though from out of nowhere. Part of her hair was swept back. She wore a soft white jacket, beige slacks, and black shoes. They both looked like adults rather than kids. They both could have whatever they wanted and not only now but always.

“Hey man how’s the boxing?”

“Ok. Not bad.”

“Any knockouts lately?”

Leo hesitated. “Not recently,” he said.

He made himself speak a little differently than he normally would. It was a small difference but it was a big difference. He had become increasingly aware of this lately. And he knew that the others did not actually know all the ways of speaking that he had. He himself did not actually know.

Julie twined her arms around one of Skipper’s and leaned into him, resting her chin on his shoulder for a second. Then she fixed Leo with an odd look. It might have been this look that really did it. Life going fast and also slow, slow and also fast, and yet punctuated by looks that break through like spears, and by voices speaking or not speaking. And now he knew, suddenly. He had not allowed himself to see it before, even though it was right in front of him. In the ring, the others are there watching on all sides, but you don’t know that they’re there. Out of the ring you could not stop knowing. In the ring you could be hit only in certain places and only in certain ways. But this was not the case out of the ring. And yet there was one thing in common between the two places, in both there were losers and winners.

He sat on the stone wall that ran along the edge of the park, far up on the east side of town, the most beautiful part of town, and looked down over the trees. It was Saturday and he had gotten through with his training. He looked out over the rows and chevrons and clusters of trees that dropped

away in levels and the vistas that opened out beyond – the slate and silver roofs of houses, the farther off streets as though set out with rulers, some threads of smoke from chimneys, here and there church spires like crusty needles, and the blurred glimmers of downtown, and when you looked straight up – how high it was, the empty blue sky, how high. Down through archways of branches, far in a deep corridor, yellow leaves dropped all at once in a small shower of gold. The afternoon light made the trees shine with such brightness. The beauty and possibility of the world lured him toward it and yet baffled his approach. Julie lived down below those treetops, among those tree-lined streets on that side of the town. Her father was a lawyer. He had met him many times. He was a nice guy. He had wrestled in college and he always took an interest. He sat there for a long time trying to work up the nerve to go down and see her, but after a long time, during which he thought about her and succeeded in forgetting about her and then thought about her some more, he left.

"So what's it going to be?" It was Maize again. "I need to know 'cause I gotta know if you're coming through for me or not." They were standing near a dumpster behind a liquor store. The wind was blowing up. An overjoyed piece of cardboard cartwheeled across the lot's near fence. Maize smelled of beer and something else. He seemed nervous.

"Yeah sure."

"Great," Maize said and lit up a cigarette. His two palms caught fire and then a tube sucked it. There was a red poppy with a long stamen, glowing. Then its plug was pulled. Maize's head was a tea kettle, steam came from his mouth. The water poured out was invisible. Leo moved a little bit away so as not to breathe in the smoke. Yet it was still fragrant around both of them. Light from the corner of the building spilled amber and lemon onto the sidewalk. It was an old liquor store. The guy who ran it was decrepit and half blind. It was easy to buy stuff there if you were under

age. Actually, the old man knew but he didn't care. In those days there weren't as many controls.

"Need to get a half pint of something."

"What?"

"Anything. Vodka. Think you can go in there and snatch that for me?"

"You mean buy it?"

"No, steal."

"Why steal?"

"No money."

"What about…?"

"Don't ask. Been having problems." Maize said this with his face turned away.

"What kind of problems?"

"Never mind, don't ask I said."

Leo had known for a while that Maize had been changing, little by little, in front of his eyes, as it were. But now the image was suddenly brought to focus. Maize was in his black corduroy jacket, his neck hunched up, collar flaps raised. He looked troll-like, shrunken, and used up.

"I can't do that."

"Come on," he said under his breath. He spat and flipped his cigarette away. "Come on."

A man came around the building edge holding a paper bag against his ribs.

"No, not really," Leo said. He stepped back one pace.

"Come on, champ."

"No. And not the other thing either."

"What do I have to do to get through to you?"

For a moment Leo doubted his own eyes. But then, no. Maize's arm extended, roundhouse. A short blade, maybe a razor. At this point things became serious. Knife attacks are at times paradoxical situations. To whom is the blade most dangerous? – Wall metal door spin without breathing, breathe. Sliding pebble grit. They are two magnets end to end, one moment

snapping together, the very next prying themselves apart. He does not really want to hurt him but the knife's really serious. It's all unbelievable. More sliding pebbles. Carousel. They screw themselves inward and down. As though slip sliding down a steep hill now – tree branch arm. Tense elastic power but little weight. He must not let the arm go. The clinch in boxing is one of the most dangerous moments. He was not so stupid as to think of hitting. But some of the most effective techniques are not done with fists – there is the shoulder jolt, the sneaking in elbow, there is stepping on the foot and then, most dangerous of all, the head butt.

"Maize jeezus –"

"Fuck you think you're some kind of – "

Maize was slammed shoulder blade first into the building, very hard. Then Leo's forehead was the hammer and Maizy's nose was the nail. He was quite limp. Blood poured from the middle of his face in three separate streams like tree roots hanging. The knife was held in the palm of some weeds. Maize was a dishrag hanging on the nail of Leo's extended arm. Then he wanted to slump down and Leo let him.

And then Leo decided to get out of there. It was a new feeling for him. Before, he might have stayed back to check how badly the other guy was hurt. But now he was not inclined to do that. He was halfway across the street towards Swann's grocery when, all at once, he stopped. So then, no, he was inclined. He turned and went back to check on Maize. He found him crumpled on his back almost in a rain puddle. There was a streetlight in the puddle and a green roof edge.

"Yeah that's fine," Maize said, pulling himself partway up. "You can just – ""

"Are you ok, Maize?"

"What's it look? You can just get out a here."

"You're still bleeding. You need something – I don't know what to get." Leo's eyes scanned the parking lot, its scattered stones, dull aluminum guard rail, the fence, burnt looking squares of old buildings, empty

windows, partly bare trees, a handful of cars. It was all so dismal. In the meantime, Maize was still on his back, bleeding.

“Ok Maize, look, take my shirt.” And with this Leo took off his jacket, then the red sweater underneath, and then peeled off his white tee shirt. Then he pulled Maize up and set the tee shirt folded up like a large dusting rag against Maize’s face.

“No, no,” Maize said and pulled away. But Leo held it out.

“Get this away,” Maize shouted, whipping his arm in a circle and then stood up all the way.

“No, you need to.”

Maize hesitated for a moment then took the shirt, holding it in his hand like he didn’t know what it was. Then he pressed it carefully against his face. He was looking down, holding the white cloth just so. He was silent and stood there in the stiff way people do when they’re in pain and feel fragile.

“Yeah ok,” he said, looking at Leo in such a way as if to say ‘What’s next?’ In the meantime, Leo had climbed back into his sweater and was drawing on his jacket. Then he reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. He had a wallet now and a watch too. It was a cheap watch, but it worked. There was never much in the wallet, but there was something. There was a single bill. It was a five.

“Here,” he said and held out the money. “You need to get a cab. You need to go to the hospital.” At the mention of “hospital” Maize’s expression changed. Then he looked back down toward the ground.

“C’mon.”

“All right, all right,” Maize said, still looking down. With the bunched-up tee shirt to his face it looked like his head had grown a cotton blossom. And then he reached out his hand and took it.

“How’m I spozed to get this cab?” He wondered at the unheard-of thing.

“I’ll go use somebody’s phone. That store.”

And with that he disappeared around the corner. It was dark now. Inky clouds covered half the sky. The wind was picking up. He stepped in through the old-fashioned door with its heavy dark wood and thick glass. The place was small, about the size of someone's living room. There was a gray carpet, dingy looking. Everything was still and silent. Then a crouched figure came out from the back. He was a head and stooped shoulders above the glass case he moved behind, his thick fingertips on them. Mop-colored hair, brown-green shirt, buttons askew. Glasses like the bottoms of three coke bottles. He stared with silent knowing amused suspicion. It was another underage kid trying to buy. He thought he'd let him dangle as he listened to the half-assed story. He'd heard them all. He croaked something Leo couldn't make out. Then Leo spoke up.

"I'd like to use your phone, sir, if that's ok."

"Phone? What for?" This was an unexpected nuisance, like having a bird trapped in your garage.

"It's to call a cab. I have a friend who's –"

"Who's what?"

"He's hurt, he – "

"Hurt how? How hurt?"

"He fell and – "

"Fell ha?" Then there was a hoarse chuckle. "All right, heh, the phone. You want the phone. No liquor, no whiskey ha?"

"No sir, just the phone."

"Yeah ok. And he reached down under the counter and took it out and set it on top of the phone book that happened to be right there. Leo looked up the number and called the cab. Then he took his leave.

"Thank you, sir," he said. The old man said nothing but put the phone back under the counter, his mind already elsewhere.

So then he was back with Maize. "Ok I called the cab. They'll be coming. I gave them the address of the liquor store but told them to come around to the back. They should see you. Ok?

“Ok,” Maize said. He glanced up, acknowledging, and then back down. He seemed to be thinking of something. Leo left him there and walked home through the wind-blowing evening. But it was night now. The clouds had slid off a bit and there were a few stars. Treetops were pulling and pushing the wind demons, but it wasn’t clear who would win. After a while he was back home and he walked down through the dirt driveway. There were puddles in the tire ruts. In one of them were fallen leaves and some twigs. Then he went up the side stirs and came in through the kitchen door. His mother was there. She was sitting sideways to the table, between it and the stove, having a cup of coffee, listening to the radio. The oven door was open a crack, and the light inside was on. “Where have you been? I kept your dinner warm, it’s in the oven.” “Ok,” he said and went to his room where he took off his jacket, hanging it on the hook of his closet door. Then he had to get another tee shirt so his mother wouldn’t notice that he came in without one. She noticed everything, as he knew. Then he went back to the kitchen and sat to eat his dinner. It was three thick slices of meatloaf, with dark brown crispy edges, mashed potatoes, bright orange baby carrots with onion strips cooked dark yellow with butter, peas with mushrooms, and a small tossed salad in a clear bowl. For dessert there were homemade molasses cookies and a coffee mug of milk.

His mother watched him as he ate. He was hungry, she could tell. “So where did you go, what did you do?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing. Ok, fine, nothing.”

“It’s that strange boy, again,” she said as she was washing his dish and fork and mug, scrubbing them down.

“Here let me do –” he said and reached to take the dish from her.

“No, that’s all right,” she said pulling her shoulder away.

“You can dry.” And she flopped a dish towel over to him.

“Ok.”

And so with Joyce, his mother, washing and Leo drying, they finished the dishes, and then Leo made her go sit down and drink her coffee while he put things away and then swept the floor.

"He's some kind of bad influence," she said.

"No, he's nothing."

Something made her think it was best to let the whole thing drop.

Leo pushed on in his usual round over the next few weeks. Maize seemed to have disappeared, and Leo did wonder about this. One noontime, while he was eating lunch in the school cafeteria, he thought he caught a glimpse of him in the crowd over by the vending machines, but it was somebody else. He noticed, on the other side of the room, that Julie was eating with some girls rather than with Skipper Smith. When she got up to leave, she walked past his table and gave him a little smile. He raised his hand slightly by way of greeting. He had to do floor work today, some rounds skipping rope, he had to work his legs with some weights, do some four-corner stepping and shadow boxing, some rounds on the speed bag, and then work the heavy bag. Then mitt work with Sonny, his coach. He didn't have to clean today. Then home to eat dinner and try to study a little, and then bed. Tomorrow there was more mitt work with rounds of sparring after. This was after he did his shift cleaning. It never ended. Maybe one day he'd make some money in the ring. Then he could buy his mother a bunch of stuff.

One Saturday afternoon when he came back from his cleaning shift, his mother asked him to go to the store to get a few things. "Get me a bag of onions, a head of garlic, some basil, if they don't have fresh then dried. And then I need two cans of peeled tomatoes and a box of barley." She was standing in the middle of the kitchen with her apron on, amid various steaming pots and her usual cup of black coffee on the table.

"Ugh, you're soaked," she said as she came over to him and brushed water from the shoulders of his coat.

“I’m ok, ma.”

“-- hate to ask.”

“I’m fine.”

So then he went. There was a cold rain out. It was November now. There was a small grocery store right down the block on the corner. The rain both washed and pockmarked the sidewalk, which shimmered. He stepped in and the bell rang. The place always had a special smell – it was like a vegetable stand and a fruit stand and a bouquet of flowers all at once, and then the smell from way in the back where the meat was cut. It was a family-run business, and they all knew him and smiled or said hello. He went around gathering his things and then brought them to the counter and paid.

Getting back, he came up onto the front porch step. It was an old-fashioned porch with carved poles reaching from the wainscot to the slant roof and gingerbread carvings at the top. The paper boy had left the Saturday paper in front of the door, and he picked it up as he went in. Inside, he set the paper down on the couch and then went to bring his mother the things she needed. He asked her if she wanted him to do anything, but she said no, and so he went back to the living room and sat down. He picked up the paper and was leafing through it idly. On the front page there were things about the war, about protests and police, about prices, unions, strikes. His eyes read the words and saw the pictures, but none of it sank into him really. It was more like a film going by, a movie. Then on an inside page called Local Crime there was something about Maize. It was him! Michael R. Stewart,16, and it gave his address – arrested for vagrancy, five counts of shoplifting, and one count of breaking and entering. Dates of court appearance. Currently held in County Jail. So that explained why he hadn’t been around. Leo knew there were problems with Maize and where he stayed. Sometimes it seemed it was with his father, at other times it was with his mother. And sometimes it seemed kind of uncertain. Leo had complicated feelings about it. Now it made sense that he

didn’t want to go to the hospital. He knew he might be arrested there. Leo thought about it some more. At least now Maize had a place to stay. And then he’d maybe go to the juvenile detention for a while…. Suddenly it was as if all the fatigue of Leo’s whole week, and even more than that, came down onto him. He stared off into space and a wave of sleep came over him and his head lolled back and he stayed like that for over an hour, his mouth open, snoring. Who knows what he dreamed about, if anything. How much did he know about Maize, really? For there was a time when Maize was with his mother and there was a time when he was with his father and then there was the time when they got back together and that was the worst of all. And at last, his father kicked him out and he found his clothes in a black plastic bag set out near the trash by the garage with another bag for his other things, and he had nowhere to go so he called some friends and arrangements were made. From that point on he shifted from one friend’s couch to another’s unused guest room, to another’s basement, and then there was the dilapidated disused greenhouse out in back of Castro’s Florist. After that he sometimes slept in small gullies at the edge of town up near Pauline street or in one of the pavilions at the city park or in dense clumps of trees and bushes there, leaving his clothes and other effects with one friend or another, picking up things as he needed, trying to make himself presentable for school. Who is the man of virtue? Is it he who rises in the morning and walks abroad in the day without fear? Or is it he who returns in the evening and throws his own son out of his own house? And who is the woman of virtue? Is it she who looks on?

And then his head snapped up and he looked around. Through the high living room windows past the drapes, he saw the way the light was, and for a panic moment he thought it was early the next day. But then he realized that he had just been asleep. Then his mother was calling from the kitchen that it was time to eat and he went in and sat down. She had made beef stew. “Sometimes you’re not eating enough, Joe. Ok? I’m talking about vitamins, all different kinds, ok?” She was standing at the stove and was

ladling a generous amount of stew into a large bowl for him. She was wearing a quilted white housecoat with a pattern of small roses on it over a pink dress. She had her work shoes on, white nurse's shoes. Then she set the bowl in front of him and went back to get her own. He waited for her. She came back, adjusted her chair and clasped her hands in front of her to say grace. During this, he looked down as usual. Then they began to eat in silence. As he was looking down into his bowl he noticed all the different colors there, all the different kinds of things – the peas so green, the carrots, translucent onions, the tomatoes in small shreds and in the broth, sliced mushrooms, pale and with smudges, there was yellow-white okra, pearly grains of rice, and the white barley like small stars. And then the chunks of soft tender beef. It was like a whole world, he thought, bits and pieces all in a sample box. All an artist needs is samples, someone once said. But we do not know if Leo had ever heard of this.

"I want you to try to get more rest," she said.

"Hmm, yeah," he said and chuckled.

"Do you have to do the boxing and all that, hun? Really? You always come in looking so tired. You look really worn out now, and you were sleeping earlier."

"I'm ok, ma."

"Yeah, ok. I still don't like it." They were both silent for a long time. It was dark out now, and outside the rain continued. But it was very warm in the kitchen. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah sure. I'm not tired. I'm never tired, ma. I don't get tired. Don't worry."